

"If 'Woman' is Just an Empty
Category, Then Why am I Afraid to
Walk Alone at Night?: Feminism,
Post-Structuralism, and the
Problematic Politics of Identity"

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If Woman is Merely an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?

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In a contribution to Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller's recent volume Conflicts in Feminism, Ann Snitow observes that "the urgent contradiction which women constantly experience between the pressure to be a woman and the pressure not to be one will change only through a historical process; it cannot be dissolved through thought alone."¹ In this passage, Snitow has identified a perennial problem in feminist politics, the problem of building a politics of liberation on women's female identity without falling into some kind of socio-biological essentialism. How are women to transform the idea of woman, which has for centuries stood as the justification for their oppression, into a basis for political freedom, and social and economic equality?

Within the academy, this question presents itself as a problem of language, as feminist scholars ponder how they might render gender "a useful category of analysis" without finding themselves and their subject trapped in the narrow, airless closet of womanhood as humanity's mysterious (if indispensable) "other." Joan Scott and Denise Riley have both sought linguistic exits from this discursively constructed dilemma, examining the category "woman" either with the sharp sword of deconstruction (Scott) or with the philosopher's more traditional weapon of analyzing how the shape and content of "woman" have altered over time.² But the centrality of the category itself, whether contested with the sophisticated tools of linguist and philosopher, or embraced in its "womanist" (ie, woman-defined) incarnation, stands as the visible sign of a deeper problem; a problem of knowledge which hovers on the edges of recent scholarship yet remains largely unexplored. The politics of identity, feminist and otherwise, rests on a disturbing epistemological ground, where the group's fragile unity, rooted in an emergent sense of identity as oppressed other, is shielded from white male colonization by asserting the inaccessibility of one's experience. Only those who share the group identity, have lived its experience, whether seen as biologically given or socially constructed, can know what it means to be black/a woman/blue-collar/ethnic in a notionally WASP America. In this fashion, oppressed groups have organized powerful movements, countering the relentless barrage of myth about democracy and equality in a land of opportunity with their own experience, put forward as a valid base for political action.

The politics of identity has proven highly effective at revealing the multiple oppressions endemic in a social and

political structure which cannot acknowledge its own deeply entrenched hierarchies. But this form of politics has its costs, and they are now emerging as people begin to ask some basic epistemological questions: what can and cannot be known, and by whom? What constitutes useful or irrelevant knowledge in a world where the icons of western civilization have been stripped of their pious, self-serving masks and revealed as the property (and cudgels) of the powerful? If we are to follow the politics of identity to its logical (if unstated) conclusion, the answer is clear: an individual's knowledge is co-terminous with her bodily identity. Knowledge is what we possess in our bones, what we have gleaned from our highly localized experiences as particular kinds of humans, bound by the biological or socially constructed chains of race, class and gender. Categories of difference are reified as humans get sorted into political and knowledge-types, and the possibility of knowing across these bodily boundaries is implicitly denied. (The politics of identity is, after all, a defensive one, designed to protect fragile entities against the blustering incursions of white men. They shall not pass.)

The logical outcome is, of course, that there are as many ways of knowing as there are categories written in the socio-biological lexicon, and knowledge is discontinuous across the boundaries. We thus dwell in a kind of neo-platonic realm, where the kinds of knowledge one has access to are rooted in one's bodily being (color, gender, sexuality). Although the categories have been historicized, identified as socially constructed, they have not yet been deposed from their crucial role as sites of consciousness-production. Indeed, since each of us is defined and delimited by class, race, and gender, and there can be no "Archimedean standpoint," no external and overarching locus of "Truth," the experiential content of these categories constitutes the sole source of authority. Each experiential territory is hermetically sealed off from the others, in order to protect the authority of one's experience from challenge or scrutiny,³ and no illusion of universal human truth stands over and above, binding (however coercively) the subjective truths of our experience into some kind of coherent social whole. We post-modern types thus find ourselves in a Republic without Guardians, that is, in a world where no one can apprehend the whole because no one can know (or approach) that which exceeds the bounds of her own experience.

Joan Scott has observed, "Those who would write 'politics' out of professional life misunderstand the processes by which all knowledge, including knowledge of history, has been produced."⁴ This is an important insight, against which her critics have fulminated in the name of value-free inquiry after a universal and singular Truth. This paper does not propose to contradict Scott's linkage of gender and history to politics, both within and outside the academy. Identity politics has been instrumental

in formulating sharp critiques of a western political culture which has doggedly insisted on shrouding its white male structure in the cloak (and dagger) of universality. It is not something which feminists, as scholars and as political activists, should easily abandon. At the same time, it is worth remembering that the politics of identity has often managed to contain its protagonists in categorical descriptions which are as narrow and unbending as those offered by the conservative political systems it stands against. The fact that individuals can neither recognize themselves in these suffocating accounts, nor reach across the boundaries of bodily being and find recognition from one another, suggests what is in fact the case: that identity politics has merely inverted the hierarchy of categories and identities handed down by the very conservative politics it seeks to subvert. It shares with its enemy an implicit grounding in a traditional metaphysics of Truth, unchanging and eternal giver of categories, and of the self-enclosed, self-reflecting subject.

Postmodern philosophies have tried to address this problem by identifying the search for a singular, reliable "truth," standing beyond political contest or the duplicities of representation, as an "effect" of power (Foucault) or language (Derrida).⁵ Hence, modern philosophies of consciousness (Descartes and Kant forward) understand truth to be that pure nugget of self-contained, self-reliant self-presence which remains once representation and empirical contingency have been abstracted out. By opposing this core of self-presence to the realm of chimerical sense perceptions and unreliable representations, philosophers have traditionally conceived truth as stable and unitary. But, as the postmodern individual knows only too well, representation (as language) is the condition on which our notion of truth rests. This transcendent entity cannot in fact lie outside the system it purports to stand above.

For many scholars, this postmodern discovery presents a grim and hopeless prospect. The death of the world, the fragmentation of the subject, and "the death of God (the divine Logos) profoundly influenced our language; the silence that replaced its source remains impenetrable...Language thus assumes a sovereign position; it comes to us from elsewhere, from a place of which no one can speak."⁶ But if the transcendental security blanket of absolute truth can be purchased only at the cost of suppressing a) the fact of its discursive construction, and b) the voices of history's many others, then this is simply too high a price to pay. This is precisely what Joan Scott argues when she summons feminist historians to join her in adopting a deconstructive strategy.⁷ Deconstruction refuses the costly sham of truth, transcendent and absolute, shimmering eternally above the empiric contingencies of history. Moreover, deconstruction reveals how that which philosophy excludes -- difference, scission, antagonism -- are in fact internal to its makeup.⁸ By foregrounding these antagonisms (conceived as textual rather than

social, pace Marx), Derrida's deconstructive weapon permits the identification of the primary binary opposition on which the text or concept rests -- the notional polarity "representation vs. truth," in this case. The critic then identifies the suppressed meanings on which the apparent unity and stability of the primary term (truth) in fact rests. What was one man's security (absolute truth) is undoubtedly another woman's tyranny, as is testified by feminists' repeated revelation of the negative characterizations of women as other on which the "truth" of male identity has rested. Deconstruction thus breaks open the coercive unity of a truth which has purchased its inner coherence at the cost of suppressing the heterogeneous voices of history's many others.

But the issue which confronts feminist scholars⁹ is not solely a question of language, though language is deeply implicated in both the form which this problem has assumed and in the search for solutions. Rather, it is a problem of how it is we conceive of the historical subject as a knowing being, and how we understand what kinds of knowledge are available to her.¹⁰ The political and intellectual stakes of this inquiry are considerable. In denying the possibility of genuine contact or exchange across the bodily boundaries of socio-biological being, the highly restrictive epistemological base of identity politics narrows the scope of human knowledge, and limits the possibility of constructing new kinds of communities. Moreover, it declares any hope of envisioning the shape and direction of diversely constituted human communities a vain and false one, a priori, for there can be nothing outside the fragmentary and localized conceptions of particular interests. As I will argue below, deconstruction does not really provide an answer here. There is no doubt that Derrida's discovery of indeterminacy and undecidability in the text offers a marvelous weapon for debunking received wisdom and the notionally stable philosophic/ontological orders on which transcendent truth rests. However, the fragmentation of both subject and knowledge, and the concomitant collapse of social relations into textual ones, diverts our attention from the operation of power in the social sphere, fixing our gaze upon its metaphorical manifestations in the text.

This paper explores several different ways that feminist scholars have sought to work through the dilemmas posed by the politics of identity. The discussion focuses on three recent books: Joan Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love, and Carolyn Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman. In each case, I ask how it is that the author conceives and connects language and experience, identity and difference, in the formation of the subject as a knowing being. I begin by examining some of the consequences which the adoption of deconstructive strategies carries for historical research. This part of the paper argues that the deconstructionist effort

to rescue identity politics by de-stabilizing existing categories is, by itself, insufficient. In fact, Derrida's campaign to expose the totalizing aims of truth has had the ironic effect of locking the deconstructionist in a contest waged on terms defined solely by modern metaphysics. By doing battle with received notions of human nature and community, necessity and freedom, deconstruction remains negatively bound to the very modern philosophies of consciousness it is sworn to destroy. I then turn to the work of Jessica Benjamin and Carolyn Steedman, scholars who avoid the sterile engagement with philosophy and take an entirely different road into the issues of experience, social difference and the formation of identity. By recasting our notion of the subject, Steedman and Benjamin mark some possible routes out of the political and epistemological bind in which we are placed by a post-modern theory which conceives knowledge as an archipelago -- isolated islands of experience which may be connected at some deeply submerged level, but as it stands, only the tip of each volcano peers out above.

I

Joan Scott's Gender and the Politics of History seeks to discover, define, and put into practice a feminist politics of history, to find a theoretical stance and method which will enable scholars to advance the cause of equality, founded on the ground of difference. The essays gathered in this collection include reviews of contemporary scholarship, in which she employs deconstruction as a tool of critical analysis, and a set of historical pieces, in which she puts her chosen strategy into practice. Each piece is animated by the conviction that gender, history, politics and the politics of history in the academy cannot be treated each in isolation from the other.¹¹

Scott is clearly troubled by the epistemological consequences of identity politics, produced by what she terms "the unilinear account of experience, identity and politics."¹² She seeks to exit from this dilemma through the post-structuralist discovery that two of the terms in this chain -- experience and identity -- rest on a pair of discursively produced fictions: that of truth (which she conflates with the extra-textual realm of "reality"), and that of the coherent, centered subject. Moreover, if the "will to truth" is immanent in the very structure of western language, if we cannot speak without engaging in the (ultimately futile) search for this extrinsic and unchanging realm of ultimate reality, then deconstruction of our own analytic categories forms an essential step in the postmodern exit. Scott thus links her plea to implement deconstruction, as a method of unmasking the textual operations of the powerful and recuperating the lost voices of the powerless, with the call to supplant "women" and "class" with "gender" (defined as the social organization of sexual

difference) as the privileged category of analysis.¹³

When she deploys deconstruction against the gendered categories which structure so much contemporary historical scholarship, Scott reveals the power of deconstruction as an instrument for textual criticism. I was especially taken with her sharp and elegant exposure of the particular binary oppositions -- irrational-rational, mystical-poetic, female-male -- which underwrite the narrative and argumentative structure of E.P. Thompson's Making of the English Working Class.¹⁴ But when she lifts the deconstructionist sword against discourses about women workers in 19th century France, deconstruction as historical method abruptly shrinks to different proportions. Master of the single text-in-the-here-and-now, it appears somehow less than adequate when waved against misogynists past.¹⁵ In many ways, these historical excursions are wonderful essays, rich in detail and filled with important and novel insights about women, work and the contours of late nineteenth century political economy. But troubling elements lurk on the edges of these dazzling exercises. On the one hand, the deconstructive approach allows Scott to demonstrate how a range of texts artificially stabilize the primary binary opposition on which their argument(s) rest, in each case repressing what it actually has in common with its dark (generally female) "other." The central dualism thus stands revealed as an unstable fiction, permitting Scott to uncover a world of conflicting meanings within the text. On the other hand, Scott's account of these artificially stabilized categories is oddly static. For example, one gets no sense of how it is that the hierarchic distinctions which underwrote male and female work identities -- the distinction between city and countryside, home and workshop, desire and reason -- were successively gendered (then neutered) over time. In deconstructing the language of anti-feminisms gone by, Scott has directed her analysis away from questions of change in favor of a synchronic explication of how texts and discourses "work."

The deconstruction of discourse past is further marred by Scott's casual attitude toward the problem of analyzing texts in their historical context. For example, in an otherwise enlightening piece entitled "L'Ouvrière, mot impie...", the reader finds herself wondering why Scott has privileged particular texts and discourses about woman workers, highlighting the work of Julie Daubié and Jules Simon, for example, rather than choosing a more widely read liberal economist like Leroy-Beaulieu.¹⁶ The choices are interesting,¹⁷ and one can imagine a number of very good reasons for turning our attention to these voices. But Scott does not make her case explicitly, beyond the stance, implicit in her adoption of deconstruction, that it is language which constitutes social being, and therefore language itself which has agency in history.¹⁸ Her choices therefore seem arbitrary, and the reader remains uncertain about how to locate the insights gleaned from deconstructing these discourses

on the broader socio-political landscape of late 19th century France.¹⁹

In Scott's work, then, deconstruction proves to be a limited tool of historical analysis, hampered first by inadequate attention to the importance of situating text in context, and second by Scott's failure to bring to bear her explicit concern for explaining changes in time on the synchronic analysis of text and discourse in 19th century France. I think both problems can be traced to the paradoxically metaphysical pre-occupations of Jacques Derrida and his deconstructionist disciples. In their struggle to unmask and subvert the universalist pretensions of truth transcendent, Derrida (and, by extension, Scott) remain transfixed by a conception of truth as that which stands eternally outside of time.²⁰ Imbued with a clear political purpose (to lift the oppressive weight of that unitary truth from the backs of history's excluded others), the deconstructionist has fixed her eye on the timeless, unchanging and linguistically ordered world of philosophic truth.²¹ In so doing, she has set aside both history and the realm of the social: the site in which truths of a different order arise, truths (or realities, if you will) which are never fixed and unchanging precisely because they rise, shape-shift and fall in time.²²

Among other things, these metaphysical fixations lead Scott to blur the distinction between textual and social relations. Scott thus exposes the underlying instabilities in the text only to locate them in a matrix where social relations are conceived as analogous to a Saussurean model of language; a world in which the identity of one term emerges solely through its differentiation from others. Once in place, the polarities freeze. There is no room in this linguistically-ordered world for change, nor can one trace an alternative path to subjectivity, for instance, viewing identity as the fluid outcome of a more dialectical process, something which arises at the confluence of both identification and differentiation. In such a world, historical subjects dissolve under the postmodern gaze; they are as fictional as the grail of singular truth which they have traditionally pursued.

Scott's deconstructive strategy thus conflates Truth and history, textual relations with social relations. The unsurprising outcome of all this is that Scott is more concerned with gender as a metaphor for power than with gender as a lived and labile social relation. Relations of power as an inescapable facet of social life recede from an analysis which seamlessly collapses history into narrative, social relations into linguistic ones.²³ The subject as such disappears altogether, a fictive unity imposed on a shifting kaleidoscope of identity fragments. For the historian, it is perhaps more productive to turn to a different kind of scholarship altogether, work which is concerned with understanding how categories like

experience, subjectivity and identity arise and shift in time; work which seeks to grasp notions of difference (self and other) in a matrix of social as well as textual relations; work which conceives the realities which arise in time as fluid yet knowable entities; work in which the world is seen not simply as textual analogue but as a combination of that which is given, that which has been constructed already and that which is in the process of being constructed; a world in which others are present, and not simply represented.

II

If Scott's call for new methodological approaches reverberates with Derridean overtones, then the postmodern voice which echoes through The Bonds of Love and Landscape for a Good Woman is surely that of Michel Foucault. Both books explore the vertical lines along which power constructs its objects as subjects. By asking different questions of the power-knowledge relation, however, Benjamin and Steedman are able to push beyond Foucault's vision of power relations shaping the subject "from the top-down." Steedman's book draws our attention to the disjuncture between power and its many objects, as revealed in the gap between narratives of working-class childhood and the trajectories prescribed for such lives in literary, psychoanalytic and sociological models of deprived childhood. When these childhoods refuse to follow the prescribed trajectories, the models stand mute and incomprehending, silenced by the unexpected integrity of these lives lived out on the margins.²⁴

Benjamin shares Foucault's interest in understanding the peculiar stake which the dominated acquire in their own domination. Her exploration of what motivates the two parties to this "master-slave dialectic" (the borrowing from Hegel is conscious and intended) leads her into the barely charted land of inter-subjective encounter, to suggest that the constitution of subject and knowledge might occur through means other than a one-way exercise of power.

In their own ways, then, Steedman and Benjamin each point feminist theory away from the premise that among differently constituted beings, no communication or encounter is possible. By allowing marxism and psychoanalysis each to interrogate the other, Steedman opens to middle-class readers a hitherto closed world of working-class childhood experience. Benjamin engages more directly with the manichean world view which informs the work of Derrida and his disciples. Thus, for Derrida, and Scott, the confrontation of a term with its repressed other issues in a struggle between polar opposites; the primary term must either annihilate or be annihilated.²⁵ Benjamin opposes this manichean logic with the notion of subjects meeting in mutual recognition; a positive encounter between unlike beings where polarization and the subsequent destruction of the "weaker" party does not

inevitably follow.

The key to mutual encounter lies in what Benjamin terms the paradox of recognition -- a simultaneous embrace of the other's similarity to and difference from the self. A truly mutual encounter, in which the existence of each is affirmed in her recognition by the other, demands that each party be able to sustain the tension between asserting the self and recognizing the other. But sustaining this tension turns out to be a tall order under the best of circumstances, and well-nigh impossible in a culture which has organized itself around the principle of male supremacy. Inevitably, the paradox of recognition breaks down; the dynamic tension of mutuality gives way to an antagonistic relation which freezes each party in the asymmetric and complementary poses of subject and object.

Once the paradox has failed, she who finds herself on the object end of the encounter can find recognition only vicariously, through identification with her oppressor. Thus the breakdown of mutuality "resolves" into the antithesis of dominator and dominated. It is a reversible connection; the asymmetrical relation of dependency between subject (who requires the object for recognition) and object (who strives for recognition via identification with the subject) can be inverted without altering its gendered fixity. But once the possibility of mutuality has been supplanted by polarity, equality is no longer possible; the terms can be inverted but complementarity and asymmetry, once established, are there for the duration.

In Benjamin's view, all relations of domination have their origin in this "twisting of the bonds of love." Her book explores how these twisted bonds constitute individual gendered subjects and social orders in which the hierarchies of race and class are inflected by gender. Here, she stakes a broad claim: that all relations of inequality are underwritten by the kind of gender polarity which Scott's deconstructive move reveals. By exploring the genesis (in time) of this polarity at the interwoven levels of culture and the individual psyche, Benjamin is able to offer a historical account of how it is that equality and difference have been lined up as the asymmetrical antinomy on which (among other things) liberal conceptions of social and political equality rest. Thus, Scott has shown that the modern liberal democratic polity views equality as the appropriate relation among like beings. Difference implicitly becomes the ground for unequal treatment.²⁶ This discovery raises a number of interesting and important questions, among them why it is that some differences, notably race, class and gender, have been deemed relevant criteria for excluding humans from the liberal-democratic political arena, while others -- like IQ -- have not. Benjamin provides a structural and historically-specified ground for probing such questions. Her geneological tracing of gender polarity moves us beyond exposing the textual operation of binary

oppositions and into the psychic and social structures which work daily to reconstitute these unstable oppositions. The Bonds of Love thus offers a compelling account of how it is that the "other" in any relation of inequality is feminized, and suggests why, in Denise Riley's words, there can be "no easy passage from 'women' to 'humanity.'"²⁷

Benjamin's argument turns on a reconsideration of Freud's classic argument, in which the intrapsychic drama of individual development recapitulates the great epic of civilization's founding moment, when the sons, overwhelmed by remorse for their crime against the father, accept the yoke of paternal law. While this argument is rarely taken as an example of good social theory, psychoanalysis has adopted Freud's retelling of Oedipus's miserable fate as the "master narrative" of the human passage from little savage to acculturated being. Benjamin enables us to rethink this account, reminding us that although Oedipus is preeminently a story about fathers and sons, its apparent reserve on the subject of women carries a disturbing, if all-too-familiar message: that women definitionally lack agency and subjectivity.²⁸

This message is reinforced at every stage of the oedipally-structured narrative of individual (male) development. Hence, even in the pre-oedipal phase, Freud represents the infant's desire for connection with the mother as a dangerous longing for return to the dark, primal swamp of our origins. As progressive beings, it is our task to escape the archaic world of undifferentiated unity with the mother, to use identification with the father as a means of escaping dependency (on the mother), and attaining the blessings (and contradictions) of autonomous adulthood in oedipal culture. Of course the road forward will look very different to a girl, since the option of identification with paternal authority is not truly open to her, at least not directly. But both male and female must push through their versions of oedipal conflict or risk the Dionysian descent into a mire of dependency and undifferentiated unity with the mother.²⁹

By figuring the mother as a danger to be fled rather than a someone to encounter, Freud forecloses on maternal subjectivity from the outset. This denial is further compounded at the moment of oedipal conflict. Here, the male child discovers himself and his own agency by entering into a doomed effort to best the father and possess his mother. In the process, he discovers his own limits (in age and power) and his difference (from the primal mother). Further, he learns to accept the rational rule of patriarchal law, a law which masks the brute reality of paternal power, and enjoins him to bide his time until he, too, can accede to the power of the father.³⁰

By this time, the mother has been reduced to a contested

point on the oedipal triangle, while her daughter has faded from the picture altogether. And, since the mother has never been encountered, difference is never really come to terms with; the boy simply flees from it. In the Oedipal world, then, "the ideal type of femininity (constituted by whatever is opposite from maculinity) absorbs all that is cast off by the boy as he flees from his mother."³¹ The end-products of oedipal struggle -- autonomous male subjects, dependent, objectified women, and a gender polarity which underwrites a host of social differences, - - thus emerge from a telling of this legend which stresses the child-male versus adult-male struggle for recognition, a struggle which happens over the body of the non-subject mother.

What Benjamin makes clear is that the Oedipal model constructs difference as polarity, and genders each pole by organizing the child's own sense of powerlessness and exclusion in highly gendered ways; it cannot escape the child's notice that the mother is merely a contested point on the triangle, and never a contesting subject herself. The central components of recognition - being like and being distinct - get split into irreconcilable opposites; the gaze of recognition, with its simultaneous embrace of similarity and difference, is supplanted by the extremes of utter identification (with the father) and denial of any similarity (to the mother). The tension of similarity-and-difference is thus polarized into a rigid antinomy of absolute difference.

Benjamin questions the necessity and inevitability of Freud's oedipally-structured telos from two angles. On the one hand, she systematically demonstrates how the Oedipus tragedy, as recounted by Freud, offers a particular constellation of social relations, and a particular connection between fact and value, as the universal human condition. But she also argues against the proposition that pre-oedipal life is nothing more than an unedifying passage through the treacherous sea of our origins. Rather, she observes that the intersubjective space³² in which to work through the core conflict -- between absolute self-assertion and the more mutual goal of recognition -- first opens up between an infant and her primary caretaker,³³ in the pre-lingual world of the pre-oedipal child.

Benjamin's case rests on reshaping our notion of the infant's inner life; replacing Freud's inward-looking "his Majesty the baby" with an interactive pre-oedipal, one who seeks to discover and move on the boundary between self and another (the mother). Far from foundering in mute, dependent oneness, these babies are beginning to ponder the idea of self and other, and to experience both the pleasure of the other, as similar and different, and the threat and pain (of loss, abandonment) which that difference entails.³⁴ If Oedipus is the myth around which intrapsychic life has been organized, the peaceful, sensual images of madonna and child which Kristeva sees in the work of

Giovanni Bellini may well be the metaphoric frame for conceiving intersubjective encounter in the pre-lingual world of the infant. Suffused in a golden light, mother and child are bound by a chain of dialectics: the child demands, the mother is independent; the mother is seductive, the child is free; the mother supports the child in hands which both hold and restrain the wriggling energy of the infant. This is a far cry from the Dionysian dance of death in which Freud locks the archaic mother and her inward-turning infant.³⁵

Inter-subjective theory thus stands against the monadic self as a closed system and social space as a landscape populated by these atomized and similar beings. It "attributes all agency neither to the subject with his innate capacities or impulses nor to the object which stamps the blank slate of the psyche with its imprint. It argues that the other plays an active part in the struggle of the individual to creatively discover and accept reality."³⁶ Social life can thus be conceived as a constant re-working and re-experiencing of the paradox of recognition, in which similar-yet-different beings encounter the agency both of self and other.³⁷ For Hegel, Freud and all others who have sought to theorize the interaction between like-yet-unlike beings, the tension between self and other always breaks down, because self-consciousness always strives to be absolute. Benjamin does not dispute this as description of our current condition. In fact, she stresses how easily the tension of recognition can polarize into the extreme postures of a self seeking absolute certainty of itself through affirmation of this sovereign self in another.³⁸ Instead, she uses Freud's account of the Oedipal drama to demonstrate why the paradox of recognition ineluctably breaks down in our culture, and why the poles of "master-slave" (subject-object) are coded male and female, even when the participants are divided not by gender but by class or race.

The eternal and universal tale of Oedipus thus proves to be the organizing myth of a particular, modern, western culture. Indeed, the cultural particularity of Freud's reading is underscored by the fact that the social and moral world which first told Oedipus's tragic tale (fifth century Athens) would never have produced so radical a statement of the individual's autonomy and social isolation.³⁹ When the oedipal world becomes the entire world (as it does in Freudian theory, where the post-Oedipal phase is only vaguely sketched and successful passage through the shoals of oedipal conflict represents the pinnacle of human development), the father's monopoly on desire, subjectivity and individuality takes on the aura of a priori truth. Agency is therefore sexual agency. Women are indeed creatures who lack, as Aristotle and his progeny have not hesitated to point out. What they lack, however, is not the phallus but desire itself; the stuff of which agency is made.⁴⁰

Benjamin thus uses intersubjective theory to suggest that the intrapsychic process of splitting and separation -- differentiating self and other into a world of atomized and irreconcilable others -- may not be the sole route to selfhood. The failure of the paradox of recognition; it's "resolution" in the polarity of recognized master and recognizing slave, is clearly rooted in the tenacious structures of oedipal culture and current childrearing practices. But it is not inevitable. In the intersubjective arena, identity can emerge from complex encounters with real others. Here lies the hope that we might learn something new, about each other and about ourselves.

For Carolyn Steedman, the hope for something new in the world also lies in hitherto ill-explored spaces; this time, in the gaps which open between power's own conception of its reach and extent and the observable truth of how it actually functions in the world. The disjuncture between power structures in the working-class household and those which are validated in the world outside allows the child to periodically sight "fractures within the system we inhabit."⁴¹ The slippage creates spaces in which working-class children learn something different, something other than that which the system seeks to impress upon them.

Through an artful weaving of history with autobiographical and theoretical reflections, Steedman takes the reader on a rather different journey through the oedipal organization of subjectivity and social difference. Here, attention to the distinctions of class also puts the "universal" myth into its place, this time as the tale of particular (middle-class) families. Oedipus as a story of paternal power is knocked off balance in families where the father is a relatively powerless individual in the larger social world. As this comprises a fairly large number of fathers (and children), Steedman's question "how does the myth work when the father is rendered vulnerable by social relations?" is not easily shrugged off by Juliet Mitchell's assertion that weak or absent fathers present no problem for a patriarchal power which has symbolically inscribed itself in the ordering of social life.⁴² If, for example, the father is all-important within the four walls of his own castle, but watchful and deferential outside them, then the child is witness not only to differences in age and sex, but also to distinctions in social power.

As working-class autobiographies testify, children are often present to and cognizant of their fathers' precarious social position; "the humility of a domestic tyrant witnessed at his workplace, out in the world."⁴³ This does not mean that the domestic tyrant does not partake of patriarchal power. But it does have consequences for the process whereby working-class children learn about themselves as classed beings, for it is in such "fractures" that many working-class children acquire knowledge of self and social difference. At the very moment when

they are coming to terms with difference (age, sex and power) within the household, and doing so in part through identification with the father, their emergent sense of powerlessness is also organized by their observation and assimilation of the fact that father's position is not confirmed by the social world outside the front door.⁴⁴

To the extent that psychoanalysis cannot relinquish its universal structures of mind, limned in "eternal" myths like Oedipus, the discipline is one which cannot come to terms with the fact that children learn something else in households where the father is weak or simply not there.⁴⁵ A theory which can proclaim the father "just as present in his absence" is theory which has abandoned its central project, namely, that of explaining how it is children learn about self and difference.⁴⁶ And a theory of learning stands at the heart of Steedman's multivalent investigation of the process whereby working-class children, dwelling outside the structures of production, come to understand exclusion, difference and social position.

But Steedman is less concerned with deposing Oedipus than with specifying its explanatory reach by exposing and exploring disjunctures in the notionally smooth intersection between paternal and social structures of power. Hence, while state and society continue to uphold paternal law as a principle of social and political order, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the actual content of paternal rule simply does not articulate with the broader thrust of state law in families which fall outside the system; where the father is either so weak as to render the "rule" of the father a source of very different lessons, or where the father's exercise of paternal privilege constitutes "law" run wild, destroying the very bodies which the state asks that families shape and nurture. In such cases, it is both descriptively and conceptually inadequate to say that the state "becomes" the father. As Landscape for a Good Woman indicates, something far more complicated is going on, something which our theory is bludgeoning beyond recognition and into line with its own predictions. Those elements which cannot be wedged into the glass slipper get relegated to the margins, in theory and in the social world itself.

Steedman's book travels on the border between history and literature, recounting stories which do not rest easily within the available interpretive frames. By looking squarely at what's out there to be seen, by assuming that she who does not fit also has a story to tell, Steedman does more than give voice to a previously voiceless other. These tales, which have no resonance except, perhaps, on the margins whence they came, mark the "aporia," the spaces where the logic of current theory fails. In her own mother's resolutely Conservative politics, for example, Steedman hears material lack etching both deference and envy onto the soul: "Conservatism was the only political form which allowed

her to reveal the politics of envy...she knew she was like them, or would be if only the world would let her be what she really was..."⁴⁷ But if psychoanalysis has been insufficiently class conscious, marxism has also missed the mark in failing to imagine class consciousness as psychological consciousness. By winding a Freudian notion of desire in and around the concept of class consciousness, Steedman shows us how material deprivation shapes our acquisition of the goods of the soul. She can then tell the making of a working-class conservative without resorting either to the condescensions of false consciousness, or to Stedman-Jones's problematic rendering of working class conservatism as solely a product of rhetoric.⁴⁸ "Bad" politics can lodge just as surely as good in the minds and hearts of those who lack, not just agency but "New Look" coats. This cannot be willed away as simply an "effect" of language.⁴⁹

Toward the end The Bonds of Love, Benjamin suggests that the breakdown of paternal authority; "men's loss of absolute control over women and children" in modern western society has exposed the oedipally-constituted male's inability to encounter the independent reality of the other. As the system cracks apart, man's failure to recognize the other, a failure "which previously wore the cloak of power, responsibility and family honor," drops the mask of patriarchal duty (the good father) and steps forth in its true guise.⁵⁰ In an interesting echo of Engels, Steedman suggests that this process is already well advanced within the multitude of unimportant, "dysfunctional" families who dwell in class societies.⁵¹ When she peers into the systemic faults which have opened around the failure of paternal power to dovetail with social power, Steedman finds lurking not only weak fathers, but daughters and mothers who are, to some degree, in possession of themselves. Because production -- of goods (exchange values) and of babies -- has social meaning under late capitalism, these women experience agency both through their power to labor and their power to produce children. This discovery has profound consequences, for one's sexuality and one's labor can be sold/alienated on a daily basis. Yet neither is truly separable from the self. The sense of self-possession to be gained from transactions in which women render themselves "both the subject and object" of their own exchanges must necessarily be partial and contradictory.

Landscape for a Good Woman thus contains a few surprises for those who would characterize women as definitionally lacking subjectivity. It suggests that one of the lessons imparted in the space between the father's domestic and social power may be some sense of female agency, however constrained or incomplete. This impression grows stronger as we read of families in which mother and (in this case) daughter continue to encounter one another as subjects. In the encounters which Steedman describes, recognition is burdened with the tensions of desires unfulfilled and needs unacknowledged. But these are not the ossified

asymmetries of subject-object complementarity, though they may have hardened in other respects. They are encounters which produce knowledge far beyond the boundaries of Steedman's own experience. Indeed, Landscape is perhaps most striking for the ways in which knowing and understanding constantly spill across the boundaries of bodily being, carried by sympathy, imagination and self-knowledge.

None of Steedman's tales from the margin can be rendered intelligible unless we recognize that material deprivation produces "unfulfilled states of desire." Until class consciousness is conceived as psychological consciousness, the stories from those who inhabit the fractures -- the father who "didn't matter" and the mother who, knowing that she owned herself proceeded to "exchange herself for a future" -- will continue to bounce off the uncomprehending ears at the center. Steedman thus asks her reader to consider what the relationship is between knowledge, social position and structures of feeling, especially desire, envy and loss. This question leads to speculation about where the transfer points may lie for some useful transactions between marxism and psychoanalysis. Marx's concept of alienation is clearly one such point. Careful re-working of Oedipus, broadly conceived as our conflict-driven passage into culture, may well be another.

Steedman's layered text implies that any reconciliation of the two will alter the shape of historical narratives, for the two paradigms work with radically different notions of time. Marxism moves in what Walter Benjamin has called "homogenous, empty time;" historic time which can be filled and marked-off by linear narrative.⁵² Psychoanalysis shifts between historic time, in which individuals develop and act in the world, and the space taken out of time which is unconscious life.⁵³ Childhood, as "a kind of history, the continually reworked and re-used personal history that lies at the heart of each present" is the device which enables Steedman to move easily between the two kinds of time-spaces.⁵⁴ Through the excavation of particular working-class childhoods, Landscape for a Good Woman begins the work of theoretical reconciliation, while offering a glimmer of future horizons in the powerful and hitherto unheard tales which Steedman can now tell.

III

At the silent outposts of the postmodern world, where "language comes to us from a place of which no one can speak," Steedman and Benjamin remind us that if silence is death, then perhaps it is language's communicative function which will restore life to our vision of subject and social world. "Language is the human invention par excellence, and the fundamental instrument of cultural freedom that gives the individual access, beyond his subjective self, to other

subjectivities, both alive and dead...we are all members of one another through language."⁵⁵ As Steedman and Benjamin both attest, language's communicative function holds, despite the postmodern revelation that language as representation cannot give us a transparent world.⁵⁶ And it is the possibility of communication, of meaningful encounter across the boundaries of difference, which will allow us to reconfigure subject, knowledge and community.

If modern feminism has been saddled with "the identity of women as an achieved fact of history and epistemology,"⁵⁷ then it is not surprising that feminist scholars have sought to loosen the bonds of womanhood through the postmodern suspicion of truth and the self-enclosed subject. There is, after all, a liberating aspect to the argument that categories like "woman" are empty vessels, filled at will by those who control the discursive floodgates. If the "reality" of woman is merely a useful fiction, constructed to suit the interests of the powerful, then surely resistance consists in relentlessly unmasking the falsehood. Hence, Derrida's frontal assault on "truth" does offer an escape from the narrow labyrinth of femininity. But the cost of liberation is very high indeed, for in the course of exposing unstable fictions like "woman," deconstruction forecloses altogether on the possibility of an authentic, meaningful subjectivity. In a world where difference is absolute, all encounters between similar-yet-different beings must necessarily issue in a struggle to the death: truth is either absolute or the deadly lie of the powerful, subjects are either the radically separate selves of a frozen master-slave dialectic or they are useful fictions, produced by the will to truth/power immanent in the metaphysics of truth. In this all-or-nothing universe, only two outcomes are possible: either Truth will prevail, and the master will assert himself absolutely, or the critic can shatter the coercive unity, of absolute truth and the transcendental subject, and so unleash the repressed voices of history's many others. In the name of freedom, deconstruction must destroy the only subjectivity it can see -- the self-enclosed subject of modern western philosophy. In so doing, it denies the possibility of any genuine subjectivity whatsoever.

Resistance via deconstruction can therefore give us only half a strategy, one which de-centers "woman" as textual/social construct, while leaving aside the dilemmas of women, who must live as subjects in time. This is no small oversight, for as Denise Riley points out, the category "woman" always conflates the attributed with the imposed and the lived.⁵⁸ For those who live in society, sexual difference is not something which can simply be argued into a corner and then left behind. Rather, individuals must inhabit those gendered categories even as they strive to unmake them. This paradoxical condition will never be resolved so long as we invoke the constructedness of "woman" in order to avoid the tangled knot of subjectivity. Hence the

importance of works like Bonds of Love and Landscape for a Good Woman. Here, identities rise not as iron masks but as fluid bases for coherent thought and meaningful intersubjective encounter. Without accepting the rigid and universalist baggage of the metaphysics of presence, both Benjamin and Steedman manage to preserve the subject as a knowing being.

One of the great achievements of postmodern philosophy has been to break apart the western tradition's great chain of power/knowledge/being. But levelling this hierarchy has also had its costs, one of which has been death of the subject and her resurrection as an isolated locale of contingent, experiential understanding. By rescuing the historical subject, Steedman and Benjamin make it possible to imagine how one might begin to reconnect these isolated locales of experience not with the vertical structures of transcendent truth, but with horizontal, communicative bonds.⁵⁹ From here, perhaps one can build theory that will enable us to find those human truths which are knowable, even as the singular conception of truth has been deposed from its pride of place, truths which bridge those bodily boundaries and provide non-coercive bases for community. Such theory should itself be able to sustain Benjamin's paradox of recognition, where encounters between similar-yet-different creatures do not end in the imaginative obliteration of the "weaker" party. By holding the similarity and difference of history's many others in simultaneous view, our common humanity could no longer be used to bludgeon our particularity. When the acknowledgement of difference no longer entails loss, of self or community, perhaps then we can turn our eyes outward in order to find who it is we truly are.

I would like to thank Kathleen Canning, Geoff Eley, Debbie Field, Pieter Judson, Tom Harrison, and the women and men from my graduate women's history seminar at the University of Michigan for many long and stimulating hours of discussion and debate over the issues aired in this review. I owe particular debts of gratitude to Mary Dearborn, Sabine MacCormack and Bill Sewell, who bravely endured several drafts of this piece and offered sage counsels on how to re-shape each successive incarnation.

Notes

1. M. Hirsch and E. Keller, Conflicts in Feminism, New York (1990) p. 19.

2. J. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, New York (1988) and D. Riley, Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women", Minnesota (1988). Both Scott and Riley explore the internal instabilities in the category "woman," but Riley does it in time, Scott in situ. Riley's historical/geneological examination of the category, of the sedimented forms of previous characterizations on which new outcroppings flourish, enables us to see gender shape shift in time; a temporally specific category produced by specific historical relations and "possessing their full validity only for and within those relations." (Riley, Op. cit, paraphrasing Marx's Grundrisse, p. 16.)

3. One significant and troubling corollary to this epistemology of identity is the assumption that merely being born into a set of constructed social/racial/gender categories endows one with reliable and meaningful knowledge of what it means to be the creature whose identity is bounded by the categories; that to be a lower-middle-class Brooklynite automatically carries a kind of knowledge of that being which not all lower-middle-class Brooklynites possess in equivalent or identical ways.

4. J. Scott, "History in Crisis? The Other's Side of the Story," American Historical Review, 94:3 (1989), p. 692.

5. By the same token, Derrida's "subject" is a fiction, an effect of the play of the text. (See J. Derrida, Of Grammatology, G. Spivak translation, Baltimore (1976). Foucault's subject, by contrast, retains her form and coherence, inherited from modern philosophies of consciousness. But Foucault breaks the links which connect consciousness with self-reflection and freedom and shows us instead how subjectification and subjection have historically travelled by the same path. The self-reflecting and (crucially) self-disciplining subject does not rise from within, the genuine expression of an inner, spontaneous reality. Rather, she is a modern creation, forged from without by the ever-more elaborate technologies of power which converge upon her, creating desires and lodging them in her most secret nature, from whence

they speak as if they formed her "true" nature and identity. See Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol I, Harmondsworth, p. 60, and C. Gordon, ed., Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, New York (1972).

6. Michel Foucault, cited in Mark Taylor, "Descartes, Nietzsche and the Search for the Unsayable," New York Times Book Review, Feb 1, 1987, p. 2.

7. See, for example, Joan Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, New York, 1988.

8. Michael Ryan, Marxism and Deconstruction, Baltimore (1982), p. 63.

9. And, I would argue, historians in general, as we all contemplate taking the "linguistic turn."

10. This is a project on which a number of feminist scholars have already embarked. See N. Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," in S. Benhabib & D. Cornell, eds., Feminism as Critique, Minnesota (1987), D. Riley, Op. cit, J. Flax, Op. cit, L. Nicholson, ed., Feminism/Postmodernism, London, New York (1990), S. Harding, "The Instability of the Analytic Categories of Feminist Theory," Signs, (Summer, 1986), L. Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism vs. Post-Structuralism," Signs (Spring, 1988).

11. As Jane Caplan has observed, this point is underscored in the very structure of narrative movement in Gender and the Politics of History, from the academy to politics, and from gender to politics. J. Caplan, "Gender is Everywhere," The Nation (January 9/16, 1989) p. 63.

12. Scott, Op. cit, p. 5.

13. Joan Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, New York (1988) p. 2. Scott's invocation of deconstruction as historical method takes the form of a plea to "refuse the fixed and permanent quality of the binary opposition, to genuinely historicize and deconstruct the terms of sexual difference," and to subject our own analytic categories to a rigorous, deconstructive scrutiny. (pp. 40-1) She then offers a two-part definition of gender as 1) an element constitutive of social relationships, based on perceived sexual differences and 2) a primary way of signifying social power. In order to see how Scott arrived at her particular theoretical formulation, one should read Gender and the Politics of History in conjunction with J. Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism, Ithaca (1982), J. Derrida, Op. cit, and J. Derrida, Spurs, Chicago (1979).

14. See Scott, Op. cit., ch 4.

15. Scott, Op. cit., ch 5-7.

16. See R. Kuisel, Capitalism and the State in Modern France, New York, 1981, if you'd like to read more about Leroy-Beaulieu's own brand of neo-classical theory and its broad impact in fin-de-siecle France.

17. Daubié's was a lone female voice in a noisy chorus of male opinion on political economy. Jules Simon was a professor who ultimately made the move from the academy to politics during the early years of the Third Republic, holding several ministerial portfolios before moving on to the Senate, in 1879.

18. See Scott, Op. cit., p. 59. I think this problem arises, in part, from Scott's definition of discourse. Unlike Foucault, who defines discourse not as text or ideology but as a system of power, Scott treats discourse as text-writ-large; its anonymous social equivalent. This move textualizes social relations in much the way that Clifford Geertz does when he "reads" culture. (See, for instance, Geertz's famous essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in C. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, New York (1973).

19. See L. Roper, "Will and Honor: Sex, Words and Power in Augsburg Criminal Trials," Radical History Review (Winter, 1989)43: 45-71 and Mary Poovey, Uneven Developments, Chicago (1988) for two admirable examples of deconstruction-in-history. Both scholars make the point that deconstruction does not mean folding context into text.

20. This pre-occupation drives Derrida to adopt what one scholar has called "the posture of incessantly harrying an unbeatable enemy." Dews, Peter, The Logic of Disintegration, London, 1987, p. 44.

21. Not surprisingly, the weapons forged in the contest against the totalizing aims of truth -- aporia, discontinuity and indeterminacy -- offer scant ground for any constructive political and intellectual projects; one cannot dance forever on the edge of the volcano, alternating between a series of dazzling deconstructive acts and the hollow laughter of the muzzled other. See J. Kristeva, Les pouvoirs de l'horreur, Paris (1980) and Polylogue, Paris (1977).

22. Scott's conflation of a textually constructed, philosophical conception of truth with the humbler and evanescent realities of history may well stem not only from deconstruction's metaphysical orientation, but also from that which is most exciting about Scott's recent work, namely, the interdisciplinary way in which she builds theory. For example, in "Gender: A Useful Category,"

a shift occurs from Derrida's notion that there is no hors-texte ("outside-the-text") to "all the world can be read as a text," which, so far as I am able to ascertain, is derived from Clifford Geertz's concept of "reading" culture. (See C. Geertz, Op. cit., although it is Geertz's "Blurred Genres," American Scholar, (1980) 49:165-79 which Scott cites in "Gender: A Useful Category.") By combining deconstruction with Geertz's idea of culture as text, Scott implicitly argues for deconstruction as the sole analytic tool; an extreme position which it is not necessary to adopt in order to render deconstruction, and gender, useful tools of historical analysis.

23. The collapsing of language and life into a single, discursively constituted structure goes beyond the Kantian view that humans of necessity perceive the world according to the contours of their sense organs; that what IS and what we perceive might as well be one and the same. Rather, the argument seems to be that our epistemic categories themselves condition perception, and so form the sole reliable object of study in a world where truth and subject stand revealed as effects of language (Derrida) or power (Foucault).

24. In one telling example, Steedman recounts Henry Mayhew's bafflement at the inner coherence and sense of self which an eight-year old watercress seller conveyed as she narrated her life story to him. C. Steedman, Op. cit., pp. 137-9.

25. Derrida's manichean conception of how it is texts undo themselves may derive from having read Hegel in an intellectual atmosphere dominated by the ghost of Alexandre Kojève. In Kojève's reading, all dialectical encounters (spirit/matter) are a series of master-slave polarities writ large. The losing party is simply destroyed, and never rises from the field, transformed (through struggle and death) to a higher level of being/consciousness. See T. Judt, Passé Imparfait: Essai sur les moeurs anti-intellectuels en France, 1944-1956, forthcoming.

26. Scott, Op. cit., Chapter 8.

27. Riley, Op. cit., p. 17.

28. See S. Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, London (1930). Benjamin is a far more sophisticated social theorist than Freud, and maintains the distinctiveness of social and psychic structures even as she demonstrates how they have dovetailed around the notion of Oedipus as THE tale of civilization. Hence, society and culture are not organized by the inner structures of mind, projected outward upon the city. Her narrative moves like a game of three-dimensional chess, shifting from the intrapsychic plane to the terrain of intersubjectivity and from there to the larger structures of society and politics.

29. Even so, when daughters embark upon their journey of oedipal separation from the mother, it is only to emerge into the "freedom" of thinghood; as daughters who are to be given away or sold outright to another man.

30. Note the lack of primal father in Freud's Oedipal schema. He lurks in terrifying violence behind the rational authority figure of the patriarch with whom the son identifies.

31. J. Benjamin, The Bonds of Love, New York, (1988) p. 170. Gender asymmetry is already rearing its misshapen head here, for if "effeminacy" poses a deadly threat to male identity (witness the horrific violence committed against gay men), the possession of "masculine" traits does not threaten female identity and may even represent a (soon to be thwarted) route to freedom for the "tomboy."

32. Intrapsychic and intersubjective theory are not mutually exclusive. The two deal with different terrains, describe distinct psychic realities. Until recently, however, intrasubjective theory has lived on the borderlands of psychoanalytic respectability.

33. That this caretaker has generally been a woman is crucial to the architectonics of Benjamin's theory.

34. See Benjamin, Op. cit.

35. See J. Kristeva, "Hérétique de l'Amour," Tel Quel, 74 (Winter, 1977). The invocation of such imagery must wait until psychoanalytic theorists prove receptive to supplementing intrapsychic notions of subjectivity with insights gleaned from the intersubjective plane. Until such time, theories of intersubjective encounter in the pre-oedipal phase will be banished to the dark, female underworld. This is equally true for Lacanian post-structuralists, for whom the unconscious is a language, structured around the self-present symbol of the phallus. (Lacan's humans are linguistically founded because language is prior to experience and present at the "mirror stage;" the founding moment of the self. Lacan thus relegates all pre-lingual interaction to the non-human, unspeaking realm of animals while rooting the phallus ever more securely as a hermeneutic center; the still point around which the world swings. In the pre-oedipal world, intersubjective encounter is largely pre-lingual, and therefore more animal than human.) See J Lacan, "Instance de la lettre dans l'Inconscient," and "Le stade de miroir comme formateur de la fonction du 'Je'" in Ecrits, Tome I, Paris (1966). Also, "Signification du Phallus," Ibid, tome II)

36. J. Benjamin, Op. cit., p. 45.

37. Benjamin owes a clear intellectual debt to the Frankfurt school, a debt which she readily (and repeatedly) acknowledges in the footnotes. More specifically, it seems to me that Benjamin is working through issues which Habermas also raises in his Theory of Communicative Action, namely, issues of identity formation via intersubjective encounter. Both are concerned with what Habermas terms the "paradoxical achievement of subjectivity." "Subjects who reciprocally recognize each other as such, must consider each other as identical, insofar as they both take up the position of subjects; they must at all times subsume themselves and the other under the same category. At the same time, the relation of reciprocity of recognition demands the non-identity of the one and the other, both must maintain their absolute difference, for to be a subject implies the claim to individuation." (J. Habermas, "Sprachspiel, Intention und Bedeutung. Zu Motiven bei Sellars und Wittgenstein," in R.W. Wiggershaus, ed., Sprachanalyse und Soziologie, Frankfurt (1971), p. 334, cited in Dews, Op. cit., p. 242.). The importance of Benjamin's work lies in her understanding of how it is that power differentials, symbolically inscribed as gender difference, shape these intersubjective encounters.

38. But another paradox nests within the paradox of recognition: we need an independent other, an autonomous subject, in which to recognize our selves. A genuine self cannot be discerned in an object-other, whether Lacan's mirror, or Hegel's slave. If the radically separate mind dominates and then imaginatively destroys reality (that which is not-me), it has succeeded in asserting itself absolutely. But the victory is pyrrhic; the Hegelian despot is left standing on a barren, windswept plain, Ozymandias with no slave-subject to recognize and acknowledge his grandiose selfhood.

39. Alice Miller approaches the particularity of Freud's reading from an entirely different angle, noting the peculiar absence of Laius, the primal father whose own hubris first sets the tragedy in motion. It is Laius's efforts to outrun the consequences of his own misdeeds (killing another man's son) and, more generally, to escape his mortal limits (inevitably, he must die and be supplanted by his son) which gives Oedipus's life its miserable and inexorable shape. In Miller's words, Oedipus becomes the guilty victim, who must pay for the sins of the father in his own life, largely because Laius has completely disappeared, from view and from memory. (He is "resurrected" in the form of the law which punished Oedipus and murdered the archaic, pre-moral mother Jocasta.) See A. Miller, "Oedipus: The 'Guilty' Victim," in Thou Shalt Not Be Aware, New York, (1984).

40. See S. Freud, "Femininity" New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis, London (1933). Further, if the mother becomes that which has-not, she who IS-not, then identification with her represents the loss of subjectivity. In an oedipally-organized

culture, the female other can have no subjectivity, for men or for women; hence no one, male or female can have an encounter of recognition with her.

41. M. Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol I, New York, (1980), pp. 84-5.

42. J. Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, London (1975).

43. C. Steedman, Op. cit, p. 72.

44. Ibid, p. 7.

45. As Steedman puts it, there is a difference "between learning of this (patriarchal) system from a father's display of its social basis, and learning of it from a relatively unimportant and powerless man, who cannot present the case for patriarchy embodied in his own person." Ibid, p. 79.

46. "The absence of a father as an imparter of patriarchal law must either posit a child's learning of it later than seems psychologically likely, must elevate the streets, schools, processes of socialization, and books to the status of the father, or must substitute a mother who teaches his lessons, passively and simply, a mere agent of the law." Ibid, p. 79.

47. Ibid, pp. 7 & 114.

48. G. Stedman-Jones, "Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth Century London," Languages of Class, Cambridge (1982).

49. "By allowing this envy into political understanding, the proper struggles of people in a state of dispossession to gain their inheritance might be seen not as sordid and mindless greed for the things of the market place, but attempts to alter a world that has produced in them states of unfulfilled desire." Steedman, Op. cit, p.123.

50. Benjamin, Op. cit, p. 181.

51. Here, Steedman follows the progressive trajectory first limned in Engels' Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, in which the author asserts that the proletariat's lack of capital denies working-class men the material base for a full-blown domination of women. Paradoxically, the first foreshadowings of the sexually egalitarian socialist utopia appear in the households of the disinherited.

52. W. Benjamin, Illuminations, New York (1968), p. 261.

53. In this space, events are understood not so much through contingency and sequential ordering (although these can be relevant) as through exegesis, or symbolic interpretation. It is analogous to the medieval Catholic notion of the "eternal present" (without past or future) in the mind of God (see, for example, St. Augustine, City of God, Book V, ch. 9 & 10; or Erich Auerbach: "the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which always has been and will be fulfilled in the future." Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, Anchor, 1957, p. 64.) The more eschatological aspect of marxist theory -- the bringing to birth of the socialist utopia in the here and now -- lodges a Messianic fragment into this otherwise linear and historical world view.

54. Steedman, Op. cit, p. 128.

55. J. Weightman, "On Not Understanding Michel Foucault," The American Scholar (Summer, 1989), p. 405.

56. In Saussure's terms, the structure (langue) remains distinct from its many earthly particulars (paroles). See F. de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, Wade Baskin translation, New York (1966).

57. Riley, Op. cit, p. 111.

58. Ibid, p. 100.

59. This should be possible even in a postmodern universe, where language no longer enjoys the privileged status of transparent medium through which the world is represented. But commitment to the idea that language does not give as a world, transparently, does not mean that we cannot communicate as subjects within language communities. Thus, Henry Louis Gates has argued "...our histories, individual and collective, do affect what we wish to write and what we are able to write. But that relation is never one of fixed determinism. No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world." Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree," New York Times Book review, November 24, 1991, p. 30. Also, see I. Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in L. Nicholson, ed., Op. cit, pp. 300-23, for an appealingly postmodern argument that the modern city provides the model for a community bound by horizontal (if evanescent) encounters of difference.

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